

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church / May 31, 2020 / Pastor Jeff Harrison
When Life Hits Hard Sermon Series
Leah: Unfavored (Genesis 29-30)

A lunch story introduces the experience of feeling unfavored

Good morning, let's ask for God's help...

I went to a large high school where we ate at different times depending on your class schedule. And one semester, I had a different lunch period than all my good friends.

Now I'd like to say that I formed great new friendships as I became the life of the lunch table party. But the truth lies much closer to me feeling a bit awkward as I sat at various tables that semester with students who were closer friends with each other than with me. Not rejected by those I sat with, but also not totally fitting in, feeling a bit unfavored.

Relevance: our response when feeling unfavored matters greatly

We all long for favor with people, to receive love and recognition. But as flawed people, surrounded by flawed people, in a flawed world, sometimes we feel unfavored; sometimes way more than my experience in the lunchroom.

I've felt unfavored in relationships, and if we're being honest here, even with God, and I bet you have too. When life hits us hard as we feel unfavored, our response matters.

There's a teenager alone at home the night of the school dance. No one asked them. And now they sit alone in their room, lights off, scrolling through Instagram, seeing everyone have an awesome time without them, tempted to conclude that there is something wrong with them. If they go down that path, it could lead to deep despair and degrading their body in a desperate attempt to seek attention.

There's a businesswoman who laments, "My dad had big dreams for my brothers, but no dream for my life beyond getting me married and out of the house." Made to feel less than her brothers, and now tempted to respond with an unhealthy drive to succeed at work no matter the cost that will harm her morals, co-workers, and push those closest to her away.

There's a struggling man already hit hard by life, now hit again by impacts from COVID-19, who wonders on the way to the liquor store, "Why has God let all this happen to me?" Feeling unfavored, even by God.

Orienting to God's Word

There's a woman named Leah in the Bible who also felt the sting of being unfavored. We're going to learn from her story in the book of Genesis. So if you've got a Bible or Bible app, open to Genesis, chapter 29. If not, no worries, we'll have the verses on the screen. And if you're new to reading the Bible, the big numbers are chapter numbers, and the little numbers are verse numbers.

Genesis starts with God giving humanity stewardship of a beautiful world. But then the humans rebel, and their sin against God, each other, and the creation tears everything apart.

And God brings just judgment, and also amazing grace. God accommodates, meaning that He works with messy ancient people where they are at in their mess. And that's important to keep in mind because God is against a lot of what happens in this story: slavery, treachery, and sister wives being examples. But in His grace, God still continues to work with these people. And thank God for that, because it means He still works in our messes too.

In Genesis chapter 12, out of this mess God graciously calls Abraham. God covenants to bless Abraham in ways that will bless the whole world. That blessing is then passed on to his son Isaac. Then Isaac marries, and he and Rebekah have twin sons: Esau and Jacob. Isaac favors the older twin Esau, who is a manly hunter. Isaac wants to give Esau more inheritance and the blessing of Abraham.

But God has told Rebekah that younger twin Jacob, who is a homebody and less favored by Isaac, will inherit the blessing of Abraham. But rather than let God bring His promise to pass, Jacob schemes his way into taking from Esau both more inheritance and the blessing.

Esau is furious and plans to kill Jacob. So the parents send Jacob a few hundred miles away to find a wife from among their relative Laban's house to give Esau time to cool down. Having messed up things at home, Jacob begins his journey. On the way, God graciously meets scheming Jacob in a stairway vision that affirms God's favor.

Teaching: Leah's Faith Journey While Unfavored

Jacob favors Rachel over Leah (29:1-20) – Bolstered by this encounter with God, Jacob journeys to Laban's in Genesis chapter 29, verse 1. **(1-3)**

¹ Then Jacob continued on his journey and came to the land of the eastern peoples.

² There he saw a well in the open country, with three flocks of sheep lying near it because the

flocks were watered from that well. The stone over the mouth of the well was large. ³ When all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone away from the well's mouth and water the sheep. Then they would return the stone to its place over the mouth of the well.

Access to water back then is a big deal, so a large stone protects the well. To only have to remove it once a day, everyone waters their livestock at the same time. As some wait for the rest to show up, Jacob strikes up conversation in verse 4. **(4-10)**

⁴ Jacob asked the shepherds, "My brothers, where are you from?" "We're from Haran," they replied. ⁵ He said to them, "Do you know Laban, Nahor's grandson?" "Yes, we know him," they answered. ⁶ Then Jacob asked them, "Is he well?" "Yes, he is," they said, "and here comes his daughter Rachel with the sheep." ⁷ "Look," he said, "the sun is still high; it is not time for the flocks to be gathered. Water the sheep and take them back to pasture." ⁸ "We can't," they replied, "until all the flocks are gathered and the stone has been rolled away from the mouth of the well. Then we will water the sheep." ⁹ While he was still talking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she was a shepherd. ¹⁰ When Jacob saw Rachel daughter of his uncle Laban, and Laban's sheep, he went over and rolled the stone away from the mouth of the well and watered his uncle's sheep.

Rather than wait for shepherds to remove the large stone, Jacob eagerly removes it by himself. As Jacob then waters Uncle Laban's sheep, perhaps he thinks about how his mom was found for his dad at a well, and that maybe he just found his future wife at a well. Whatever Jacob thinks, he gets emotional in verse 11. **(11-12)**

¹¹ Then Jacob kissed Rachel and began to weep aloud. ¹² He had told Rachel that he was a relative of her father and a son of Rebekah. So she ran and told her father.

That's quite a way to meet a woman, kissing her while weeping. 😊 Perhaps Jacob got a little overexcited here with God's vision and now finding Rachel. Next Rachel goes to tell her father, and we see his response in verse 13. **(13-14a)**

¹³ As soon as Laban heard the news about Jacob, his sister's son, he hurried to meet him. He embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his home, and there Jacob told him all these things. ¹⁴ Then Laban said to him, "You are my own flesh and blood."

Laban greets Jacob enthusiastically. Things look off to a great start with his possible father-in-law. Let's see if that great start continues in the middle of verse 14. **(14b-17)**

After Jacob had stayed with him for a whole month, ¹⁵ Laban said to him, “Just because you are a relative of mine, should you work for me for nothing? Tell me what your wages should be.” ¹⁶ Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. ¹⁷ Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel had a lovely figure and was beautiful.

There’s debate about Leah’s “tender” eyes in verse 17. Some English Bibles translate it “weak” eyes: that Leah has unattractive eyes that lack brightness or have a problem. Other translations take “tender” to mean that Leah has delicate, appealing eyes. Either way, based on ancient beauty expectations, Leah and her “tender” eyes do not measure up to her gorgeous younger sister. And predictably, Jacob professes his love not for Leah, but for the stunning Rachel in verse 18. **(18)**

¹⁸ Jacob was in love with Rachel and said, “I’ll work for you seven years in return for your younger daughter Rachel.”

Back in those days, marriage was typically less about romance and more about building family, economics, and survival. But in this case, Jacob is in love with the stunning Rachel, but he has a problem. He doesn’t have money to pay the customary bride price. So he overbids, offering to work for seven years to ensure he closes this deal for Rachel. Verse 19: **(19)**

¹⁹ Laban said, “It’s better that I give her to you than to some other man. Stay here with me.”

I don’t know how it sounded back in their culture, but to my ears this sounds like some father-in-law sass. 😊 “It’s better that I give her to you than to some other man.” But more importantly, Laban’s statement in verse 19 only gives the appearance of agreeing to Jacob’s terms. Then verse 20 goes on: **(20)**

²⁰ So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her.

Awwww. 😊 After those seven years, Jacob the unfavored son and brother is finally experiencing his relationship of favor with gorgeous Rachel.

Leah learns to praise while unfavored by Jacob (29:21-35) – But there’s a twist, starting in verse 21. **(21-24)**

²¹ Then Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife. My time is completed, and I want to make love to her.” ²² So Laban brought together all the people of the place and gave a feast.

²³ But when evening came, he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and Jacob made love to her. ²⁴ And Laban gave his servant Zilpah to his daughter as her attendant.

Laban and his daughters pull the ultimate switcheroo. But how did Jacob not realize it was Leah instead of Rachel? I don't know 😊 maybe you're just going to have to let that go to receive what God has for you in this story.

I'll share one possible explanation. Maybe scheming Laban encourages Jacob to get drunk at the feast in verse 22, making Jacob less aware. And it's nighttime by verse 23, and if you've been camping far from the city, you know it can get really dark there in a tent at night, so that helps. And perhaps Leah also has on a bridal veil as she enters Jacob's tent. Whatever the details, instead of his favored relationship, Jacob receives a terrible surprise as we shift to his perspective in verse 25. **(25-27)**

²⁵ When morning came, there was Leah! So Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? I served you for Rachel, didn't I? Why have you deceived me?" ²⁶ Laban replied, "It is not our custom here to give the younger daughter in marriage before the older one. ²⁷ Finish this daughter's bridal week; then we will give you the younger one also, in return for another seven years of work."

Man, Laban drops the hammer on Jacob, scheming Jacob the schemer. As Jacob once exploited his brother's strong desire for food into selling Jacob his inheritance birthright, so Laban exploits Jacob's strong desire for Rachel into seven extra years of unpaid labor.

And as Jacob once exploited his father Isaac's inability to see, pretending to be his brother Esau to steal Esau's blessing, so Laban exploits Jacob's inability to see, having Leah pretend to be her sister Rachel, to steal seven more years of labor. What a treacherous and destructive scheme.

Imagine you're Leah here. You've never measured up to your gorgeous younger sister, who has a man working seven years to marry her, while no one wants to marry you. And now your dad apparently thinks that he needs to trick a man into marrying you, and not just any man. Talk about being unfavored, the unexpected wife of the man in love with your gorgeous sister, who then also becomes Jacob's wife in verse 28. **(28-30)**

²⁸ And Jacob did so. He finished the week with Leah, and then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife. ²⁹ Laban gave his servant Bilhah to his daughter Rachel as her

attendant.³⁰ Jacob made love to Rachel also, and his love for Rachel was greater than his love for Leah. And he worked for Laban another seven years.

What a tough situation all around, but especially for Leah. Though Jacob knew how it felt to be the less favored sibling, he does not hide his greater love for one sister over the other. So the LORD provides favor for unfavored Leah in verse 31. **(31-32)**

³¹ When the LORD saw that Leah was not loved, he enabled her to conceive, but Rachel remained childless. ³² Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Reuben, for she said, “It is because the LORD has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now.”

In Hebrew, “Reuben” sounds similar to “see”. So Leah says with Reuben’s name that God “sees” Leah’s lack of favor and mercifully gives Leah a son. So Leah speaks well of God in verse 32, but notice what she hopes this son will accomplish, saying, “Surely my husband will love me now”. Let’s see if Jacob does in verse 33. **(33)**

³³ She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, “Because the LORD heard that I am not loved, he gave me this one too.” So she named him Simeon.

Simeon’s name in Hebrew sounds like “hears”. Leah again sees God’s gracious work, saying by Simeon’s name that God “hears” about Leah’s sad situation and gives her another son. But Leah remains the unloved spouse, sadly lowering her desires in verse 34. **(34)**

³⁴ Again she conceived, and when she gave birth to a son she said, “Now at last my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons.” So he was named Levi.

In Hebrew, “Levi” sounds similar to “attached.” Now, unfavored Leah hopes only that Jacob will at least become attached to her because of their sons. As Leah’s strategy to find favor continues to be unsuccessful, she takes a very important next step in verse 35. **(35)**

³⁵ She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, “This time I will praise the LORD.” So she named him Judah. Then she stopped having children.

This time Leah names her son “Judah”, which sounds like the Hebrew word for “praise”. Her longing for her husband’s favor is still unmet, yet Leah praises, saying, “This time I will praise the LORD.” That praise may have sometimes included tears or anger, but she praises, seeing Who God is and the favor He is providing through these four sons.

Leah's response to Rachel treating her unfavorably (30:1-24) – But sadly, as Leah has a growing faith and family, Rachel grows envious. Now Leah is also unfavored by her sister in verse 1 of chapter 30. **(1-8)**

30 When Rachel saw that she was not bearing Jacob any children, she became jealous of her sister. So she said to Jacob, “Give me children, or I’ll die!”² Jacob became angry with her and said, “Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?”³ Then she said, “Here is Bilhah, my servant. Sleep with her so that she can bear children for me and I too can build a family through her.”⁴ So she gave him her servant Bilhah as a wife. Jacob slept with her,⁵ and she became pregnant and bore him a son.⁶ Then Rachel said, “God has vindicated me; he has listened to my plea and given me a son.” Because of this she named him Dan.⁷ Rachel’s servant Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son.⁸ Then Rachel said, “I have had a great struggle with my sister, and I have won.” So she named him Naphtali.

Like Leah, Rachel uses Hebrew wordplay in naming her sons. In naming her second son, we see Rachel views Leah as a defeated rival. Let’s see how Leah responds in verse 9. **(9-13)**

⁹When Leah saw that she had stopped having children, she took her servant Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife.¹⁰ Leah’s servant Zilpah bore Jacob a son.¹¹ Then Leah said, “What good fortune!” So she named him Gad.¹² Leah’s servant Zilpah bore Jacob a second son.¹³ Then Leah said, “How happy I am! The women will call me happy.” So she named him Asher.

So now there’s a fourth wife in this marriage. Like we said at the beginning, God graciously accommodates, working with people where they are at, good news for them and us. But I see growth on Leah’s part. As she continues to be unfavored by her husband and sister, Leah gives these sons names that sound like “good fortune” and “happy.”

Now if I was Leah, I might have been tempted, while giving Rachel some side-eye, to name my son something in the Hebrew like, “No, I won the struggle”. But Leah doesn’t rub things in with Rachel. She gives these sons appropriate names, no longer naming her sons out of desperation to win her husband’s love, or focused on outdoing her sister, these sons benefitting from Leah’s spiritual growth as she has learned to praise. But Leah is still in progress, like us, and things become even more like a daytime soap opera in verse 14. **(14-15)**

¹⁴During wheat harvest, Reuben went out into the fields and found some mandrake plants, which he brought to his mother Leah. Rachel said to Leah, “Please give me some of your son’s mandrakes.”¹⁵ But she said to her, “Wasn’t it enough that you took away my husband?”

Will you take my son's mandrakes too?" "Very well," Rachel said, "he can sleep with you tonight in return for your son's mandrakes."

Ancient people thought mandrakes induced fertility, which is why Rachel wants some. Leah refuses, talking about how Rachel has taken away her husband. It appears that Rachel makes sure Jacob stays with her every night, and never with Leah. Talk about being the third wheel. So Leah is not sharing her mandrakes since Rachel isn't sharing their husband.

So the sisters negotiate about what should be above negotiation, agreeing Jacob will sleep with Leah and Rachel gets the mandrakes. Occasionally you'll hear someone say that the Bible isn't true, that some group came in and changed it to make things look good and advance an agenda. But if that were the case, stories like this would no longer be in the Bible.

But they are, because God's Word is truthful even about the ugly side of God's people. And now that the sister's dubious negotiations are complete, unsuspecting Jacob walks up in verse 16. **(16-18)**

¹⁶ So when Jacob came in from the fields that evening, Leah went out to meet him. "You must sleep with me," she said. "I have hired you with my son's mandrakes." So he slept with her that night. ¹⁷ God listened to Leah, and she became pregnant and bore Jacob a fifth son. ¹⁸ Then Leah said, "God has rewarded me for giving my servant to my husband." So she named him Issachar.

To her credit, Leah doesn't name this son "5 to 0 Rach" or "7 to 2" if you count the servant's children. Rather, Leah again speaks well of God in naming Issachar, which sounds like "reward." Then in verse 19 God favors Leah further, and remembers Rachel. **(19-24)**

¹⁹ Leah conceived again and bore Jacob a sixth son. ²⁰ Then Leah said, "God has presented me with a precious gift. This time my husband will treat me with honor, because I have borne him six sons." So she named him Zebulun. ²¹ Some time later she gave birth to a daughter and named her Dinah. ²² Then God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and enabled her to conceive. ²³ She became pregnant and gave birth to a son and said, "God has taken away my disgrace." ²⁴ She named him Joseph, and said, "May the LORD add to me another son."

God has been taking Rachel on her own journey, and in these verses He finally gifts her a son. And Leah credits God for blessing her with a sixth son and is blessed with a daughter too.

Next Step

In many ways, Leah's life wasn't blessed: unfavored by a scheming dad, an unloving husband, and a jealous sister. But as life hit Leah hard, she went on a journey of praising God for the favor He provides. And if that's not a lesson for these COVID-19 times, I don't what is.

Like Leah, when our relationships are distant and difficult (like say living alone or in a stressed out house during a pandemic); or when life is not turning out how we dreamed (like our 2020 plans); or when we feel we don't measure up to the "Rachels" around us, may we join Leah in praising God for the favor He provides. That's our next step this morning. Praise God for the favor He provides.

As God helped Leah to grow spiritually in praising while unfavored, so we have growth opportunities in our varying challenges in these COVID-19 days. Opportunities to go deeper in our relationship with God and to healthier relational styles even when unfavored.

I have ways that I feel unfavored in my life, and I bet you do too. I focus pretty often on the ways I feel unfavored. And there is definitely a time and place to lament the ways our lives are not turning out as we dreamed. But the more I focus on praising God for the favor He is providing, the better it goes for me and those I love. That's why Leah's story matters to me.

Like Leah, we won't handle everything well when unfavored, it can be so, so hard. But God is working, there is always more going on than what we see. In Leah's case, her conniving dad didn't have the last word on her life, her withholding husband didn't have the last word on her life, her jealous sister didn't have the last word on her life, God did, accommodating to work in that family dysfunction to bring Leah incredible favor, most of which she didn't even see.

Imagine right now God sent you back in time to talk with Leah at this point in her life. She's amazed as you say, "Leah, I'm from thousands of years in the future and I just heard your story in God's holy book."

And then Leah's amazement grows as you open a Bible and say, "Look, this part of the Bible shows how your children become the start of about half the tribes of God's people. And look, here's the story of your descendants, Moses and Aaron, freeing God's people from slavery and starting a line of priests from you son Levi's tribe. These priests serve God for generations."

And you say, "Look Leah, your son Judah starts the kingly tribe, from whom great kings like David and Solomon came. And here's the best part, the gospel of Matthew. Leah, you are related to Jesus, the King of Kings, God in the flesh, the One through Whom God's promise to Abraham to bless the whole world comes true. Look Leah, Jesus lived a perfect life in your

place, on your behalf, and then chooses the cross, experiencing the ultimate disfavor so that you, and me, and all God's people, will one day enjoy God's favor forever. That's how the story ends Leah, everything made new, no more feeling unfavored."

As Leah processes all God's favor with her seven kids and all that you've told her, she becomes overwhelmed with emotion, and before she can speak, suddenly you're transported back to today. You look around, and the service is over, and you leave with new strength to praise God for the favor you see now and will see in eternity. You're dismissed, God bless you.